

PERFECTION

February 25, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Matthew 5:43-48

"You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."
-Matthew 5:48 (RSV)

That's quite an assignment. Be perfect. Not "try harder." Not "do better and better everyday." Simply, "Be perfect..." and, to define it further, if anyone needs further instruction... "as God is perfect." That's quite an assignment.

It comes at the end of a sequence of moral teachings of Jesus that seem to be increasing in intensity and strenuousness... The Sermon on the Mount.

-You are salt of the earth

-Your goodness must exceed the goodness of the Pharisees who, as everybody knows, were the moral superstars of his day...

-Anger is wrong. So is lust.

-You must turn the other cheek, don't resist evil, give away all your clothes, pray for your persecutors, love your enemies...

-Be perfect.

The Sermon on the Mount is perhaps the most beloved and most frequently cited portion of the New Testament, mostly in isolated, manageable portions... And at a safe distance, the way we go to the Art Institute to see Monet's "Haystacks" and are inspired by Monet's incredible deftness and subtlety - without concluding that it is in us somehow to paint like that, or even to aspire to. Or the way we watch, if God smiles on the major league baseball negotiations meetings, and the owners and players keep at it, as Shawon Dunston spears a hard hit ball off to his right and then does what no human body ought to be able to do, pivots 180 degrees in the air and throws the ball 100 feet and nails the runner at first, without concluding that one can do that...

The Sermon on the Mount, that is to say, as spectator activity, something Jesus did and Peter and James and John approached; but not me, slogging it out here in 1990, in a world of serious moral ambiguity...

where there doesn't seem to be any comfortable or clear moral alternatives about the great issues of justice and morality... Slogging away day by day, getting angry, feeling lust, living on the shadow side of what is right and good in order to keep a job, or a relationship, or a reputation... Hoping no one gets hurt as a result of how I live and hoping, that God, at the end of the day, will somehow find the end result not too offensive.

But - Be perfect? If there is anything we understand it is our imperfection.

The combination of these moral imperatives can cause despair, cynicism, guilt - or simply a rejection of the whole business... Thus it is my proposal this morning that we take a second look, a careful look, to be very certain we know what Jesus of Nazareth was saying and not saying...

First, the background: The simple fact is that we continue to define religion in negative, not positive terms. And in that propensity we continue a human tradition, thousands and thousands of years old. In Jesus' day the law of Moses had become the instrument of faithfulness, defining in negative terms, a person's relationship with God and with the rest of the community. The common idiom has it that most of the good things in life are either illegal, immoral, or fattening. Religious morality usually comes to the same conclusion and it's unfortunate corollary, namely that if you manage to avoid doing the wrong things, eating the wrong foods, saying the wrong words, doing the wrong deeds, you will have succeeded in fulfilling the moral law, or maybe even saving yourself. That is the background against which we must hear these words of Jesus.

The original hearers, the disciples sitting on top of the mountain, the people at the bottom of the mountain - the Pharisees and scribes and Saducees - standing around the perimeter of his ministry for three years - those were not bad people. The Pharisees particularly were good. They knew they were good. They had it made. They obeyed the law, all of it... and what they heard Jesus saying was congratulations, but that isn't enough. In fact, if that's all there is to your faith, you have missed the point.

You have heard - "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." That's in the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, twenty centuries before Christ. The Jewish people picked it up from the Babylonians. It is the standard foundation for public justice throughout much of the world. Its purpose was to restrain the human propensity for overkill; it was a curb on vengeance, and an attempt to set appropriate penal standards. No more will be exacted from the perpetrator than he or she took: "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth." Jesus said, that's not it if we're talking about faith. Jesus said "don't resist evil, turn the other cheek."

That's revolutionary. When people have the courage and strength to live it, things begin to happen. As a matter of fact, what changed the laws and then the heart of this nation twenty years ago were television images of young black and white people sitting at a lunch counter with a jeering mob surrounding them, ketchup and salt and coffee-cream and spit on their heads and faces - not resisting evil... literally turning the other

cheek. The power of the Civil Rights Movement was Martin Luther King, Jr.'s insistence on non-violence, on praying for the persecutor, loving the enemy and seeing liberation as freeing both oppressed and oppressors from the evil of racism.

Jesus was careful not to reject the traditional moral standards of his culture. "I have not come to abolish the law," he said, "but to fulfill it." But, in point of fact, what he did was completely redefine the nature of religion itself. He did it in the Sermon on the Mount by setting up six antitheses, "You have heard that it was said,... but I say to you." Six times he does that. Six times Jesus isolates a traditional moral-religious precept, and enlarges on it, expands it, and has it begin to define this new way of life he's talking about.

"You have heard that it was said... 'You shall not kill.'... But I say to you everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment.

Six times Jesus holds up traditional moral standards and says, in essence, these laws are good, valid and necessary. But faithfulness to me means more than these. The power and tension mount as he lays out the six incidents until he comes to the finale, the climax... "You must be perfect, as God is perfect." Now if religion is legalism, simply following the rules - you and I are not going to make it or else Jesus was wrong, absolutely irrelevant.

So let's look at the critical word - **Perfect**. People who spend their lives in classrooms with biblical materials tell us that perfect is probably an unfortunate English translation. Unfortunately, because it plays so easily into our propensity to turn religious faith into legalism. It does not mean morally flawless. In fact, it doesn't have anything to do with traditional morality. The word perfect means complete, mature, full grown, whole.

(Now let's back up and apply that to what he says about anger.) Psychologists have assured us that it is unhealthy and ultimately impossible to deny human feelings. You can't not feel anger. In fact, Jesus did not. He got angry enough one time to knock over the tables of the money changers and drive the merchants out of the temple.

But Jesus was right. It is connected to destruction, murder, even self-destruction. You do not have to live out of your anger. You can be adult enough to restrain the behavior which wants to grow out of the anger you're feeling. One of my favorite Frederick Buechner vignettes is his wonderful definition of anger -

"Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back, in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you."
[Wishful Thinking, p. 2]

Perfection as maturity means not living out of your anger.

Perfection as maturity means being all that we can be - mature adults in Christ. Apply it to another seemingly impossible admonition: "If anyone sues you and takes your coat, give him your cloak as well." A Jewish man in the first century, particularly a poor man, did not have a drawer full of underwear, shirts and sweaters. He owned, I am told, two items of clothing. A coat, an undergarment with sleeves, and a cloak, an outer garment, also used as a blanket. For a poor man to give up both would leave him naked.

Knowing that, I believe that Jesus' hearers knew immediately that he was not proposing a new set of rules to be added to the old list. They knew he didn't mean for them to be naked. They knew he was asking them to think in a new way they had never thought before and then to live in a new way... beyond the traditional negative definition of goodness, a way that could only be described as complete, whole, mature. Generous - giving - caring for the needy - responsible for the needy - related to the needy as brother and sister... in a new way.

You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbors and hate your enemies." There is nothing particularly strenuous about that. In fact, it is altogether passive. How you act in relation to another human being is determined by how that other person is acting toward you. If she is friendly, so are you. If he is an enemy, so are you. As we think about it for a moment, we see that our personal identity is actually being determined by that other person. Jesus wants more, a goodness beyond the minimum standards. Jesus is here teaching something very important, namely that true human life, mature, full human life, is determined not by other people but by God; by God's grace and love actually beginning to operate in your life. You and I are called to be neighbors regardless of how the other is acting toward us. [See Fred Craddock in The Christian Century, 2/7-14/90]

Think about what a difference that would make in our closest relationships... if instead of allowing a spouse or friend to control who we are by hooking into our anger, resentment, pettiness... if somehow we were adult enough not to respond in that vein... to love and accept and forgive with disciplined intentionality. What a difference it would make. Jesus told the disciples to emulate God in their dealings with other human beings. And his point, the point of his whole life, in fact, was that God is love - God loves all. God's love is inclusive - dependent on nothing in the other person; that God's love comes to all individuals regardless of their merit.

How different that was - and is - from traditional religion: religion as keeping all the rules, avoiding all the evil. Religion as legalism misses the point. Legalism suggests that our value, our identity comes not from God but from what we do and how we do it. Legalism can keep us in a perpetual state of guilt because we are not perfect. Legalism, if superimposed on these difficult words of Jesus, makes our situation enormously painful. We cannot measure up. We cannot live without the range of feelings which are natural and belong to our humanity.

Legalism leads to guilt and it also invites judgementalism... constantly criticizing others because of their obvious imperfections.

The sad thing is, the shame is, that in adapting legalism as a religious lifestyle we have missed the point. We have missed the teaching of our Lord that there is a whole new way of thinking offered here; a new way of being human and faithful and Christian. A way based on Good News - God's love for us.

"Sin boldly and have great faith," Martin Luther advised. Living in this world involves taking some risks, making moral decisions that are not always clear. What Jesus taught his followers was not a new legal prescription but a new way of being - created by God's love, motivated by God's love, shaped by God's inclusive love for all - equally - without reservation.

Sometimes it breaks through, right into the ambiguity of human life. One of the very humbling and moving aspects of observing ethnic and religious hatred become violent throughout the world is a renewed appreciation that this country somehow managed to live through a Civil War: managed to survive deep hatred and one of the most violent conflicts in human history, certainly the most costly in terms of American lives lost. Part of the reason we survived a Civil War, part of the reason we are one nation today, historians agree, not the only reason, but part of it, is that the President of the United States at the time knew a little bit about the creative power of redemptive love, knew a little bit about the Sermon on the Mount, that is to say.

In his Second Inaugural Speech, as the war was coming to its inevitable and awful conclusion, Abraham Lincoln looked ahead and said things victors don't usually say -

"With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and orphan - to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace."

What a mistake it is to see religion only in negative terms. How sad to regard the Christian faith as merely another set of rules.

What Jesus wanted of his followers was maturity, independence; he wanted them to be adults living up to their full potential, living thoroughly in the world, but on a radical new basis - God's perfect, all inclusive love.

In one of Robert Fulgum's delightful little stories he tells about visiting the Cathedral in Ulm, Germany and recalling one of its famous characters, Hans Ludwig Babblinger. Babblinger, who lived in the sixteenth century, thought he could fly, devised some wings, got lucky and caught an up-draft and soared safely to the ground. When he was asked to repeat the performance for the King, however, he went to a different place, caught a down-draft and plunged into the river.

"The next Sunday, from the pulpit of the great cathedral, the Bishop of Ulm called Babblinger by name and shamed him for the sin of pride."

"Human beings were not meant to fly" thundered the prelate.

Babblinger was so crushed by the accusing wrath of the Bishop, he never appeared in public again and not long after, died of a broken heart.

Fulgum was watching a 747 jet plane, 35,000 feet overhead when he thought of Babblinger and he mused:

"Historically, the symbol of the pulpit (and we could substitute legalistic religion) has been the pointing, damning finger. Accusing men and women of sin, failure, wickedness, iniquities, and the pride of thinking too highly of themselves. Preaching that on this earth there is no hope, in this life there is no glory."

"I say the pulpit should stand for wings. Not angel wings or eagle wings or any other wings you've ever seen. Wings of the holy human spirit - wings that lift heart and mind to higher places." [It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It, p. 191-194]

Jesus said - "Be perfect."

It is finally, I think, a choice we must make. If we choose to live in Christ, we are choosing to live under orders to love as inclusively and thoroughly as God loves... That will mean making tough decisions, not always simple and clear decisions... and it will never be easy.

There will be times when we will not be able to not resist evil... when we cannot not be angry... when we will not turn the other cheek.

And in those moments, instead of despair, we may remember that the one who set the standards loves us - lived for us - experienced every bit of our lives with us - died for us, in fact - died so that we might live as adults, free, strong... fully in this world.

It is quite an assignment... the promise is that we are not alone in this. The promise is that God is with us, giving us the strength to love... The promise is that we live in God's love; that our judge is also our Savior.

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You call us to live faithfully in a complicated world, O God... When we are confused, remind us that we are loved. When we make mistakes, remind us that we are forgiven. When we feel alone and frightened, remind us that we are yours forever; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.